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# *A hunt to ease a 'guilty conscience'*

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## Rabbi notes timing of U.S. decision to track Nazi doctor

By Merrill Hartson  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department decided to launch a belated search for Josef Mengele because "everybody knows we hardly got our hands wet looking for war criminals," a prominent Nazi hunter maintains.

"The sad truth is that the West utilized Nazi war criminals after the war... and has a guilty conscience," says Rabbi Marvin Hier, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies in Los Angeles.

Rabbi Hier said, nevertheless, that he was "gratified" by the department's decision, even though it came 40 years after the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, where Mengele, the so-called "Angel of Death," was said to have conducted gruesome experiments on twins and was responsible for the gassing and cremation of prisoners.

Neither Attorney General William French Smith nor Neal Sher, director of the department's Office of Special Investigations, would say specifically last week why the investigation was

being started now. It has been widely believed for years that Mengele, who would be 73 if still alive, had found sanctuary in South America.

Moreover, Smith refused to say whether the Justice probe was triggered by a revelation — not yet rebutted — that U.S. Army occupation forces in Austria may have apprehended Mengele in 1947 and then set him free.

Instead, said the attorney general, "The allegations have been such, and the public interest has been such, and the notoriety of the individual has been such, that it seemed to be appropriate."

In a telephone interview, Rabbi Hier noted that Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had ordered an investigation by an independent commission to learn whether any

Nazi war criminals are in Canada.

The recent disclosure of a declassified Army document indicating that U.S. forces might have released Mengele, together with a mock trial in Jerusalem held by survivors of Auschwitz, might have built "the necessary momentum" to spur the Reagan administration to act, the rabbi said.

"Everybody knows we [the United States] hardly got our hands wet looking for Nazi war criminals," said Rabbi Hier, whose group gained public release of the Army document through the Freedom of Information Act.

He pointed out, for instance, that the department had found that Klaus Barbie, the "Butcher of Lyons" accused of killing 4,000 French Jews and deporting 7,500 others to concentration camps, was employed by U.S. Army intelligence to spy on French and German communists in Europe after the war.

The probe, similar to one undertaken earlier in the administration involving Barbie, appears to broaden the scope of investigations envisioned by an executive order issued by then-Attorney General Benjamin R. Civiletti in 1979 spelling out the limits of the Office of Special Investigation's reach.

The order, a congressional source said, provided in general terms that the agency should limit its efforts to denaturalization and deportation of Nazi war criminals living in the United States who had falsified citizenship papers and had hidden their

identities to avoid prosecution for their crimes. The source spoke only on the condition of not being identified.

Sher said he could not comment publicly on the Mengele investigation beyond what he told a news conference Wednesday.

The parameters of his office's investigations generally are set by the attorney general, who decides what probes it should undertake, said one department official.

A former high-ranking Justice Department official, who agreed to discuss the issue only on the condition that he not be identified, said the probe of Mengele by the Office of Special Investigations repeats "the precedent set" in the Barbie case. He said a probe of this type "might better be carried out" by the FBI or CIA.

Rabbi Hier said he was not worried about possible technicalities.

"The agency has had a good track record" in rounding up about 300 Nazi war criminals in recent years, he said. But Rabbi Hier added that he believed that "literally thousands" remained undetected in the United States.